

To modern people, idols may seem quaint and primitive; something that Indiana Jones might want to steal from a temple, but not something to take seriously.

Of course, the word idol might also remind you of “American Idol” and other widely popular talent contests; but that would be another topic for another day.

To relegate religious idols of wood or stone to the past would be to sadly underestimate our human tendency to look for God, like love, in all the wrong places.

Because we are created in the image of God, there is a “God shaped” hole in every human life that only our relationship with the living God can fill. When we turn to things, or even people, to fill that hole, we make of them a kind of idol.

When it is the living God we seek, whether we can name that or not, anything less than God will disappoint us, and leave us feeling empty. St. Augustine knew our insatiable human cravings very well when he wrote, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O God.”

St. Paul writes about idols in our Epistle reading. He is not writing a general theological or philosophical treatise for people who are in to that kind of thing. He is writing about the mission of the church in his time and place and he is addressing a real and sensitive pastoral issue: what should Christians do with food that has been offered to idols? You could say to yourself, I can eat this food because the idol is not real. There is no god other than the true and living God! So I’m going to tuck into this burger with a clear conscience.

But how might this affect a new convert, someone who is not long in the Faith? Someone who still has loud echoes of that idol rattling around in their psyche! The religion of Greco-Roman civilization and the many temples devoted to gods of war, sex, wine, love, and wealth are not without power over hearts and minds!

The particular issue of food offered to idols may be remote, but St. Paul's focus on mission and his pastoral wisdom speak to us today.

If you're going to plant a garden you need to know your soil and your climate. The same is true if you're trying to grow your church. To do our mission we need the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, or better yet, the internet. We need to be aware of the circumstances, challenges, fears, and hopes of people in our culture, otherwise our ministries and our programs will not connect with the very people we're trying to reach. This is no easy task in our modern complex society of many cultures. But we are not without the help of the Holy Spirit. And God has given us many gifts and talents.

A new and experimental initiative like "Messy Church" seeks to connect with families who find it difficult to come on Sunday morning. Instead of saying, "Gee, that's too bad you can't attend when we have Church." We periodically offer a different kind of experience of church, at a different time, on a different day. The same pastoral sensitivity that has St. Paul writing, "I'll give up meat if that's what it takes to keep a brother or sister in Christ," is the same impulse that says, "I'll offer an experience of Church on a Saturday afternoon at five, if that's what it takes to nurture a family in Christ."

St. Paul's willingness to pass up food offered to an idol, if he thought that it would hurt someone who was less spiritually mature, gives me an insight into what troubles me about the phrase "spiritual but not religious." The root of the word religion means to bind. In our baptism we are bound to God in a covenant of love. God in Christ has freely committed himself to us, even to die our death, that we might rise with him to new life. Christ's commitment to us, invites our commitment to him.

St. Paul is reminding us that our faith isn't just about God and me, or about my spiritual needs and my spiritual journey. The binding that is religion is also about being willingly bound to others in caring community. We give up our absolute autonomy in return for the greater joy of life in the Body of Christ.

I happily confess to being both spiritual and religious, but St. Paul would remind me that it does no good to thunder against those who are not, but to get on with the mission. Invite others to know Christ and to make him known, not as an individualistic personal saviour, but as the head of a body whose mission is to work with God and renew the face of the earth.

Many of the same idols which tempted early Christians remain with us today. They no longer have temples, they operate in disguise. There is still a God shaped hole in every human life. The living God is still seeking us, wanting to fill our emptiness with divine love and compassion.